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Citation for published version:

Carter, JA & Chrisman, M 2012, 'Is epistemic expressivism incompatible with inquiry?', *Philosophical Studies*, vol. 159, no. 3, pp. 323-339. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11098-011-9710-9>

Digital Object Identifier (DOI):

[10.1007/s11098-011-9710-9](https://doi.org/10.1007/s11098-011-9710-9)

Link:

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

Document Version:

Peer reviewed version

Published In:

Philosophical Studies

Publisher Rights Statement:

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IS EPISTEMIC EXPRESSIVISM INCOMPATIBLE WITH INQUIRY?¹

forthcoming in *Philosophical Studies*

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1 February 2011

Abstract

Expressivist views of an area of discourse encourage us to ask not about the nature of the relevant kinds of values but rather about the nature of the relevant kind of evaluations. Their answer to the latter question typically claims some interesting disanalogy between those kinds of evaluations and descriptions of the world. It does so in hope of providing traction against naturalism-inspired ontological and epistemological worries threatening more ‘realist’ positions. This is a familiar position regarding ethical discourse; however, some authors (e.g. Field, Heller, Gibbard, Blackburn, Chrisman) have recently defended a similar view regarding epistemic discourse. Others (especially Kvanvig, Cuneo, and Lynch) have argued that epistemic expressivism faces special problems, not necessarily attaching to expressivism about other areas. Their arguments differ in interesting ways, but the common strategy is an attempt to show that the very sort of meta-epistemological theorizing needed to articulate and establish epistemic expressivism involves the epistemic expressivist in some sort of internal incoherence or self-defeat. That is, they think that articulating or defending the position requires implicit commitment to the negation of one of the positions core tenets. This paper responds to those arguments on behalf of epistemic expressivism, suggesting that they each misunderstand what is crucial to epistemic expressivism. By responding to these arguments, we hope to achieve more clarity about what epistemic expressivism is and why one might want to endorse it in a meta-epistemology.

Keywords: epistemic expressivism, meta-epistemology, epistemic irrationalism

¹ For helpful feedback on this paper, we would like to thank Terrence Cuneo, Klemens Kappel, Christos Kyriacou, Michael Lynch, and Michael Ridge.

IS EPISTEMIC EXPRESSIVISM INCOMPATIBLE WITH INQUIRY?

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1. Introduction

In search of a satisfactory account of moral thought and practice, ethical expressivists encourage us to ask not about the nature of ethical *value* but rather about the nature of ethical *evaluations*. Their answer to the latter question typically claims some interesting disanalogy between ethical evaluations and descriptions of the world. We might call this change in question and the subsequent answer by disanalogy *the core expressivist maneuver*. For example, Gibbard writes, “The expressivists’ strategy is to change the question. Don’t ask directly how to define ‘good’...[rather] shift the question to focus on judgments: ask, say, what judging that [something] is good consists in”(2003: 6). In early crude forms, the core expressivist maneuver involved the idea that ethical evaluations are expressions of our noncognitive sentiments rather than our cognitive representations of things in the world. In later more refined versions, expressivists have argued that ethical evaluations are expressions of a special kind of belief, whose role in our cognitive economy is importantly practical rather than representational. In both cases, the expressivist account of the nature of ethical evaluations is supposed to provide crucial traction against ontological and epistemological problems motivated by naturalism that threaten more ‘realist’ approaches to accounting for the nature of ethical value.

The basic thought is that, by construing ethical evaluations as interestingly disanalogous to descriptions of the world, we do not have to countenance in our ontology something—ethical facts or values—epistemic access to which is potentially mysterious and elusive; rather we can investigate something that is quite common—ethical evaluations—by the typical philosophical means by which we come to understand our thoughts and practices. Although it is sometimes seen as a debunking position, there is nothing in expressivism that requires us to stop thinking ethical thoughts or to disengage from ethical practice. The view is a *meta*-ethical view about the nature of ethical thought and practice, which is supposed to be neutral with respect to various plausible views one might defend in the course of engaging in ethical thought and practice.

There is a healthy debate in metaethics about the viability of this sort of position, which has led to a number of difficult critical questions: can the expressivist satisfactorily account for the semantics of ethical language, inferences involving ethical thoughts, ordinary talk of ethical truths and propositions, the appearance of ethical knowledge, the possibility of fundamental ethical error, and the general distinction between realism and antirealism? Our project here, however, is not to enter into this debate. Rather our project stems from apparently close parallels between the issues driving that debate and issues in epistemology.

Recent epistemology has taken a distinctively metaepistemological turn: questions about the semantics of epistemic language and the nature of epistemic values have become prominent. And, although epistemologists have been slow to see this, this turn clearly raises the question of the viability of an epistemic analogue to ethical

expressivism. That is, in search of a satisfactory account of epistemic thought and practice, the *epistemic* expressivist would redeploy the core expressivist maneuver by encouraging us to ask not about the nature of *epistemic facts or values* but rather about the nature of *epistemic evaluations*. And he would claim some interesting disanalogy between epistemic evaluations and descriptions of the world. Such a disanalogy would be metaepistemologically interesting if it meant that we do not have to countenance in our ontology something—epistemic facts or values—epistemic access to which is potentially mysterious and elusive, and could instead investigate something that is quite common—epistemic evaluations—by the typical philosophical means by which we come to understand our thoughts and practices. (If epistemic facts and values don't appear potentially as mysterious and elusive as ethical facts and values, notice that there's as little agreement in epistemology about what constitutes a belief's being justified as in ethics about what constitutes an action's being justified.) Again, such an expressivist position may seem to some to be a debunking position; however, if the parallel to ethical expressivism is tight, it need not be. There should be nothing in ethical expressivism that requires us to stop thinking ethical thoughts or to disengage from ethical practice, so why think there has to be something in epistemic expressivism that requires us to stop thinking epistemic thoughts or to disengage from epistemic practice? Epistemic expressivism is a *meta*-epistemological view about the nature of epistemic thought and practice, which is supposed to be neutral with respect to various plausible views one might defend in the course of engaging in first-order epistemic thought and practice.²

We remain unsure about the viability of epistemic expressivism. For many of the problems threatening ethical expressivism are general problems allegedly stemming from the core expressivist maneuver, and so they threaten epistemic versions of expressivism too. However, there are three recent attempts to argue against epistemic expressivism – due to Kvanvig (2003), Cuneo (2008), and Lynch (2009) – that seek to identify some special problem with expressivism as deployed in meta-epistemology. Our goal in this paper is to rebut these arguments, which will put us in a position to make more precise that to which epistemic expressivism is committed and why epistemologists might want to consider it as a live option in developing their meta-theory.

2. Kvanvig on “Epistemic Nonfactualism”

The first argument against epistemic expressivism that we want to consider is gleaned from Kvanvig's (2003) criticism of Field's (1996, 1998) *non-factualism* about *a priori* justification. However, the point Kvanvig makes should generalize to broader sorts of epistemic expressivism. Field suggests that in calling a belief (he is specifically concerned with beliefs in logical truths) “*a priori* justified” we are not describing some independently existing fact about the belief's having the property of being *a priori* justified; rather, we are in some sense expressing an attitude or stance. He writes, “we should have a non-factualist attitude towards justification...; it is a matter of policy rather than fact,...and the question is only whether it is a good policy. It makes no sense to ask whether logic *really is* justifiable *a priori*” (1996: 377). This represents a form of

² Several authors have defended something like the view. See Blackburn (1996), Field (1996, 1998, 2009), Gibbard (2003: ch. 10), Chrisman (2007).

epistemic expressivism, as we are conceiving of the view, because Field is claiming that a certain species of epistemic evaluations are not to be understood in terms of their purporting to represent epistemic facts or values but rather in terms of what it is to evaluate some belief in this way. His idea is roughly that, in claiming that *S*'s belief that *p* is *a priori* justified, we are taking up a positive stance towards evidential norms that would license *S*'s believing that *p*, even though that belief is not based on empirical observation. And, crucially, taking up a positive stance does not constitute a commitment to the existence of some kind of property—a priori justification—that this belief has.

This idea can be generalized (as Field himself does in his 2009) by picking up on another idea that Field uses to motivate it. He suggests that there are competing epistemic standards in play whenever we evaluate a belief as justified to a degree sufficient for knowledge. These include at least reliability and power. And he argues that, in any given case, there is no fact of the matter about how we should weigh these competing considerations, and so to say that someone's belief (in a theory, Field seems to think) is justified is *not* to state a fact, but rather, to adopt a stance/policy. And, if we think that knowledge requires justification, knowledge attributions would also, at least in part, involve the adoption of a stance/policy rather than a simple statement of fact.

Kvanvig argues that this sort of epistemic expressivism is incoherent because any defense of the view will have to presuppose the truth of certain norms of justification and explanation. That is: defending the view involves claiming that epistemic expressivism is *better* justified than its competitors. However, according to him that means that the epistemic expressivist like Field has to presuppose what his position is designed to reject—namely, that some normative epistemic claims are true. As Kvanvig writes, “The simple point is that arguments and explanations presuppose the truth of epistemic norms, and if the norms themselves are given non-alethic status, then the explanations and arguments are simply defective in virtue of the fact that their presuppositions are not true”(2003: 176).

The mistake we see in this argument is the assumption that the expressivist has to give epistemic norms “*non-alethic* status”. We take it that what Kvanvig means is that the expressivist has to deny that claims of the form ‘Belief-forming method *X* is better than belief-forming method *Y*’, or ‘*Z* is a good way to form beliefs’ and so also claims of the form ‘*S* is justified in believing that *p*’ or ‘Belief *B* is reasonable’ are truth-apt. However, that is simply a mistake about the nature of expressivism. To be sure, the earliest expressivists (e.g., Carnap and Ayer) denied that at least some normative claims are truth-apt. However, the dominant expressivist strategy in the recent literature in metaethics has been to grant the cogency of ordinary normative discourse, which clearly treats normative claims as truth-apt, but then to explain the idea of a normative truth in a non-representationalist way. Indeed, a popular way to do this is to adopt something like the deflationary theory of truth that Field himself forcefully champions. The details get complicated, but the very basic idea is not: When we say that a sentence *S* is true, we should not understand this as the claim that *S* has some special (robust) property — that is shared by all and only true sentences; rather, we should understand this as embodying just the same commitments as a bare assertion ‘*S*’ would. From ‘*S*’ is true, we can disquote to get: *S*, which is why the truth predicate is sometimes called a disquotational device.

So, since Field himself is a deflationist about truth, he is going to have no problem at all with the idea that arguing for his theory presupposes that some normative epistemic claims are true, for that will just come to the presupposition of some epistemic norms, and he thinks such presuppositions are not factual statements but rather the adoption of stances or policies.³ In fact, this is now what he explicitly says. He writes, “in my view, the word ‘true’ has an important logical role that is as important for normative claims as for others” (2009: 267). The same is true with any other form of epistemic expressivism that follows recent ethical expressivists in granting the cogency of treating normative claims as truth-apt. Thus, on any reasonable version of epistemic expressivism, there is going to be no problem with accepting the key idea behind Kvanvig’s criticism—viz., that epistemic evaluations are truth-apt. It is just that it will always be argued that this doesn’t commit one to anything more than one is committed to in making the bare epistemic evaluations. And, as we insisted at the outset, epistemic expressivists, like ethical expressivists, don’t encourage us to stop engaging in the practice of epistemic evaluation; they simply offer a different account of what this involves.

Now, Kvanvig might respond by insisting that he means something other than mere truth-aptness by ‘alethic status’ when he imputes to the expressivist the idea that epistemic norms don’t have alethic status. For example, maybe he means that epistemic expressivists are committed to rejecting any ontological commitment to objective epistemic facts or values. We’ll discuss these ideas more in §3 and §4 below; for now, however, let us say that is far from clear that there is anything *incoherent* or *self-undermining* about rejecting such ontological commitments while going on to defend a philosophical theory. If you reason using *reductio ad absurdum*, for example, it is far from clear that you are presupposing that there is an objective fact of the matter about the correctness of classical logic (over, say, intuitionist logic). Maybe you are just adopting the policy of using classical logic for your present argumentative purposes; your argument will be convincing to anyone who has similarly adopted this policy, regardless of whether there is an objective fact of the matter about the correctness of classical logic. So, it seems that either Kvanvig has misinterpreted epistemic expressivism, or he has assumed something much too strong in his argument against it.⁴

³ Of course, that move raises a deeper issue about drawing the distinction between realism and irrealism. Field has a proposal, which is discussed in his 1994. Many others have discussed this issue. See footnote 10 below for further discussion and references. In any case, this is an issue about the viability of expressivism *in general* and not about the viability of epistemic expressivism in particular. At the outset we set such general issues aside in hopes of getting clear about local arguments against epistemic expressivism.

⁴ Kvanvig offers an independent argument against epistemic expressivism, which he calls the “Spock-Problem”. This stems from his idea that Spock-like individuals who are highly intelligent but lack any affective states at all are possible and, were they to exist, they could still have knowledge. We’re unsure of this possibility (how would such an individual ever be motivated to pursue more evidence for a hypothesis?). However, in any case, it wouldn’t undermine epistemic expressivism since this view isn’t about the states of the putative knower but about the state of mind expressed by one who attributes knowledge, which, in this case, is one of us humans who do possess affective states. So, we won’t discuss this objection more here.

3. Cuneo on “Nontraditional Expressivism” in Epistemology

The next argument against epistemic expressivism that we want to consider comes from Cuneo (2008), who is sensitive to the popularity of deflationary accounts of notions like ‘truth’ among contemporary ethical expressivists. This allows for what he calls “nontraditional versions of expressivism”, such as the quasi-realist views defended by Blackburn (1998), Timmons (1999) and Gibbard (2003). Extending their program from metaethics to meta-epistemology, Cuneo thinks, provides for a version of epistemic expressivism that “proves to be a resourceful view capable of incorporating realist-seeming elements that allow it to respond to objections—in some cases, convincingly so—that are commonly leveled against it” (2008: 145). Nevertheless, he thinks that nontraditional versions of epistemic expressivism fail. In this section, we will outline his argument and say how we think the epistemic expressivist should respond.

As Cuneo sees things, what distinguishes most nontraditional expressivists from their traditional forbearers is the acceptance of a “deflationary package” which allows them to say much of the same things that realists say, but without a commitment to the ontology of realism.⁵ So, in the case of epistemic expressivism, nontraditional expressivists will be able to accept claims about the truth of epistemic statements. This means that, for some evaluative sentence *S*, as long as the expressivist has a cogent irrealist account of the evaluations we make by stating *S*, there will be no ontological commitment added in recognizing the possibility that *S* is true. To recognize the possibility that *S* is true is just to recognize the possibility that *S*. This is what Cuneo refers to as the “deflationary sense of truth,” which allows him to articulate a thesis of nontraditional epistemic expressivism as a modification of the traditional expressivist’s denial of truth-aptness. This is the “*Modified Alethic Thesis*: The contents of some epistemic claims are true, but only in a deflationary sense”(Ibid.: 147).

Moreover, as is familiar from the literature on deflationism, this view about truth allows for a distinction between two ways of thinking of propositions. If propositions are thought of as the primary bearers of truth-values, we have the notion of propositions as the bearers of truth-values on a nondeflationary understanding of what it is to be true or false, but we now also have the notion of a proposition as the bearer of truth-values on a deflationary understanding of what it is to be true or false. As Cuneo sets things up, the term ‘proposition’ is reserved for the former, which he sees as “representational”; and he calls the latter ‘quasi-propositions’, which he conceives as “nonrepresentational”. This

⁵ He allows for another kind of nontraditional expressivism he calls “maximalist expressivism”. This is not the metaepistemological analog of the metaethical expressivism defended by people like Blackburn, Gibbard, and Timmons; rather it is a view that follows Wright and Horwich in treating truth as a “minimal” property and so epistemic facts as real but mere “shadows” – in the sense of Wright (1992: 181-182) – of minimally true epistemic sentences. He counts this as a form of expressivism because of its capacity to deny that there are epistemic facts and values *as the realist understands these things*. However, we remain unconvinced that such a view is properly viewed as a form of expressivism, so our focus here will be mostly on what he says about expressivist views that adopt what he calls the deflationary package. However, we’ll note (in footnote 8) below one way that appealing to “maximalist expressivism” might provide a rejoinder to our counterargument and explain there why we think this won’t help in the present dialectical context.

allows him to articulate another thesis of nontraditional epistemic expressivism as a modification of the traditional expressivist's claim that pure ethical claims are not the assertions of a proposition. This is the "*Modified Speech-Act Thesis*: When an agent sincerely utters a predicative epistemic sentence, that agent does not thereby assert an epistemic proposition, but rather 'asserts' an epistemic quasi-proposition" (Ibid.).

Finally, whichever way one understands the notion of a proposition, it is natural to understand the notion of a fact as a true proposition. Cuneo suggests that this allows for a further distinction between 'fact' as the realist understands this notion and 'fact' as the deflationist understands it. Again, he reserves the term 'fact' for the former and calls the latter 'quasi-facts', allowing him to articulate the following thesis of nontraditional expressivism as a modification of the traditional expressivist's bare denial of epistemic facts. This is the "*Modified Ontic Thesis*: There are no epistemic facts, only epistemic quasi-facts" (Ibid.).

In light of these three commitments, Cuneo thinks nontraditional epistemic expressivists can say many plausible things that more traditional expressivists could not. From the perspective of engaging in epistemic discourse, they can say that: (i) It's true that some beliefs are well-supported while others are not; (ii) One who claims to have good reasons for his views is asserting a proposition that may be true and may be false; (iii) It's a fact that not every theory can be supported by the evidence. For they'll insist that we should understand (i) as making a claim about what's true *in a deflationary sense* of 'true', (ii) as making a claim about the assertion of a *quasi-proposition*, and (iii) as stating a *quasi-fact*.

Accordingly, nontraditional expressivists will have a way to explain and even endorse the features of epistemic discourse that may, in Blackburn's words, "tempt one to realism" (1984: 171). However, as Cuneo sets things up, this is supposed to be consistent with the expressivist's antirealist view that, from the perspective of ontology, epistemic facts do not show up alongside the other facts, to whose existence we should be committed in any robust way. In this way, nontraditional epistemic expressivism would clearly avoid Kvanvig's complaint that epistemic expressivism is committed, absurdly, to both the idea that epistemic claims are not truth-apt and the idea that that some epistemic claims are true. Nontraditional expressivists will deny the former commitment and freely grant the latter commitment. They'll just insist that we understand their commitment here in a deflationary way that doesn't really commit them ontologically to epistemic facts.

Cuneo is sensitive to the possibility of this maneuver, but he articulates a further objection directed specifically at this nontraditional form of epistemic expressivism. He calls this objection the "Perspective Objection" because it has to do with the way he thinks epistemic expressivists need two perspectives—one from which they can engage in epistemic discourse, saying things such as (i)-(iii) above, and another from which they can state their view including its three core theses. He refers to these perspectives as the "internal perspective" and the "external perspective", writing:

The internal perspective...is supposed to be the perspective that captures what it is like to be an agent engaged in ordinary epistemic thought and discourse; it is the arena in which it appears to an agent that she is giving and assembling epistemic reasons, epistemically evaluating beliefs, uttering epistemic truths,

representing epistemic reality, and so forth. The external perspective, by contrast, is supposed to be the perspective of the naturalist philosopher who in Terry Horgan and Mark Timmons words is engaged in ‘metaphysical speculation’ or ‘theoretical inquiry’, but believes that there are no epistemic reasons or facts. (ibid.: 170)

The problem Cuneo has with the non-traditional expressivist’s commitment to two perspectives is that he thinks there can be *no such thing* as the external epistemic perspective when it comes to epistemic thought and discourse. The external perspective, he argues, would be a perspective from which we think both that there are epistemic reasons and facts, and that there are no epistemic reasons and facts. Cuneo takes epistemic expressivists to be committed to this absurd conclusion because he takes them to be committed to stating and arguing for their meta-epistemological position from the external perspective of “theoretical inquiry”. However, as Cuneo puts it, “anything we could recognizably call ‘theoretical inquiry’...involves viewing ourselves as assembling reasons, epistemically evaluating claims, offering arguments, and so forth” (Ibid.). He thinks this makes it impossible to take the external perspective with respect to epistemic discourse and practice: “anything we could recognizably call theoretical inquiry requires taking not the external, but the internal perspective” (Ibid.).

So, although the details are more sophisticated, the structure of Cuneo’s argument against epistemic expressivism is similar to Kvanvig’s. The thought is that, in virtue of their antirealism about epistemic discourse, epistemic expressivists are committed to one thing, whereas in virtue of the general nature of inquiry – even inquiry into the correct meta-epistemological view – we all, including expressivists, are committed to the opposite. Kvanvig thought the expressivist is committed to denying the truth-aptness of epistemic claims, which Cuneo recognizes to be incorrect because of the possibility of being a nontraditional expressivist through adopting something like the deflationary package. But he thinks the expressivist who adopts the deflationary package is committed to the possibility of an external epistemic perspective, whereas, in virtue of the general nature of all inquiry, everyone – the expressivist included – is also committed to the impossibility of an external epistemic perspective.

The mistake we find in Cuneo’s argument is suggested by the structural similarity to Kvanvig’s argument. Just as Kvanvig was wrong to think that the epistemic expressivist is committed to denying the ‘alethic status’ of epistemic claims, we think Cuneo is wrong to think that the epistemic expressivist who adopts the deflationary package is committed to the possibility of what he’s calling the ‘external perspective’. To be fair to Cuneo, we want to note that he takes over the idea of an external perspective, which is separate from the perspective of engaged normative thought and discourse, from extant expressivist writings.⁶ So, we want to allow that some expressivists have indeed

⁶ He cites Blackburn (1993: 157, 172 - 3, 1998: 50), and Timmons (1999). Both of these expressivists appeal to this idea in the course of articulating forms of *ethical* expressivism. It’s interesting that attempts, sometimes by the very same authors, to articulate a form of *epistemic* expressivism do not typically appeal to this idea (Cf. Field 1998, 2009, Chrisman 2007). So, we grant that the idea of a divide between internal and external perspectives has been a seductive expository device among ethical expressivists, but we want to maintain that epistemic

committed themselves to this idea, but we don't think it follows from or is presupposed by the core expressivist maneuver of changing the question from the nature of certain kinds of values to the nature of the correlative kinds of evaluations, in hopes of drawing an interesting contrast between epistemic evaluations and descriptions of the world.

If the change in question were to involve switching from an internal to an external perspective on the world, as he is thinking of them, then we think Cuneo would be correct in his insistence that there is something incoherent about stating and arguing for a meta-epistemological view from an external perspective supposedly constituted in part by the denial that some beliefs are well-supported and others are not, some claims are based on adequate reasons while others are not, or some theories can be supported by the evidence and others cannot. However, we think the change in question involved in the core expressivist maneuver should be understood in a more straightforward way: not as an attempt to take up an 'external' perspective constituted by the denial of all value, reasons, and evidence, but as a change from

(i) a question about the nature of some feature of the world whose existence is disputed: epistemic facts or values

to

(ii) a question about the nature of a *different* feature of the world whose existence is not in dispute: epistemic *evaluations*.

In our view, an answer to (ii) can be sought from the same perspective on the world as we sought an answer to (i); it's just that the expressivist thinks the correct answer to (ii) reveals the motivation for (i) to be based on the false presupposition that epistemic evaluations seek to describe the world. If we accept the expressivist's answer to (ii), it's not as though we have adopted a strange perspective constituted by the denial that some beliefs are well supported and others are not, some claims are based on adequate reasons while others are not, or some theories can be supported by the evidence and others cannot. As far as the expressivist is concerned, we can continue to think all of these evaluative thoughts; indeed, we can continue to ask ourselves things like "Is it a fact that justification is required for knowledge?" or "Are reliable beliefs better than unreliable ones?" It's just that the expressivist has a story about these thoughts and questions which understands them not to be about some feature of the world, and that, he thinks, makes (i) to be otiose or otherwise misguided. This is like someone who says that questions about the nature of *negative* facts can be seen to be otiose or otherwise misguided once we appreciate the use of negations (words like 'not' and symbols like '~') doesn't involve referring to or describing some aspect of the world one might have wanted to call "negativity" from a hyper-realist point of view.

Cuneo may object that surely, even after changing the question, the expressivist owes us an explanation of why it seems that epistemic claims describe the world. He often writes of the "realist-looking features of ordinary moral thought and discourse" (Ibid.: 162) or the "realist-seeming appearances of ordinary epistemic thought and discourse" (Ibid.: 170). And he suggests that the whole point of the nontraditional

expressivists needn't be committed to it, at least not in the same sense that Cuneo attacks in his argument.

expressivist's deflationary package is to explain why these appearances don't force us to adopt a form of realism. So, he may object that *even if* the expressivist's core maneuver is constituted in the change in question from (i) to (ii), the project of accommodating these "realist-seeming" appearances within an expressivist view requires the illicit change in perspective from internal to external.

We think this objection turns on the false presupposition that ordinary epistemic discourse is "realist-seeming", i.e. that epistemic claims seem to describe the world. While it does seem to us that epistemic discourse involves sentences in the grammatical category of *declaratives*, to which it makes sense to apply the truth predicate, these grammatical facts don't imply that epistemic claims describe the world.⁷ That would require a further commitment to the view that all declarative sentences describe the world. Do they? Do sentences like "It's necessary that $1+1=2$," "The law of excluded middle is false," "I shall go to the opera tonight," or "It might rain tonight" all describe the world? There are debates to be pursued about particular cases, but we think the existence of these debates undermines the quick move from declarative grammatical form to "realist seeming".

And, in any case, it doesn't seem to us that epistemic claims *do* describe the world; it also doesn't seem to us that epistemic claims *don't* describe the world. We think this issue is just too theory-laden for it to seem one way or another. Notice how strange it would be to ask your mother "Does it seem to you like epistemic claims describe the world?" by contrast to the perfectly ordinary questions "Does it seem to you like this summer is hotter than last?" or "Does it seem to you like this shade of blue [pointing to an item of clothing in a shop] is darker than the other one?" Of course, this contrast is not an argument, but we do think that it is suggestive.

Perhaps we are being uncharitable in laying so much stress on Cuneo appeal to the "realist-seeming" nature of epistemic discourse. To avoid that, we want to conclude this section by considering a simple argument one can glean from his discussion, which avoids the misleading metaphor of perspectives and doesn't rest on the assumption that epistemic claims are "realist-seeming". This argument starts with the premise that (1) the contents of some epistemic claims are true. This is seen as a commitment of ordinary epistemic discourse and, indeed, something to which anyone who engages in inquiry is committed. The next premise draws an analytic connection between 'true' and 'fact': (2) the content of a claim *S* is true *iff* it's a fact that *S*. From these premises, it follows that (3) there are some epistemic facts. However, in light of his commitment to the Modified Ontic Thesis, (4) the nontraditional expressivist denies that there are epistemic facts. (As Cuneo interprets the point, nontraditional expressivists deny that there are epistemic facts but accepts that there are epistemic "quasi-facts", which Cuneo sometimes interprets as "virtual facts".) Premises 3 and 4 imply that nontraditional expressivism is wrong.

⁷ He may mean something less committal by "realist-seeming appearances". If he means only that the sentences are declarative and that the speech acts involving these sentences are assertions, then we don't disagree but merely note the unfortunately dogmatic label "realist-seeming appearances, for these appearances are as much "idealist-seeming" or "pragmatist-seeming". In our view, declarative grammatical form and assertoric force should not be thought to prejudice – even *prima facie* – the ontological interpretation of ordinary discourse.

This argument avoids the metaphor of different “perspectives”, and the conclusion follows from the premises. However, we think the epistemic expressivist should reject premise (4). This premise is based on Cuneo’s definition of nontraditional expressivism in terms of the Modified Ontic Thesis, which we quote again:

Modified Ontic Thesis: There are no epistemic facts, only epistemic quasi-facts. (op. cit.)

However, notice an interesting contrast between this and the Modified Alethic Thesis as he states it:

Modified Alethic Thesis: The contents of some epistemic claims are true, but only in a deflationary sense. (op. cit.)

The Modified Alethic Thesis *doesn’t* involve the denial that the contents of some epistemic claims are true. Because of this, we suggest that the way Cuneo has set up nontraditional epistemic expressivism imputes a negative commitment that need not be part of the view. That is to say, an epistemic expressivist could resist Cuneo’s version of the Modified Ontic Thesis, and replace it with the following:

The ‘Modified’ Modified Ontic Thesis: There are epistemic facts, but only understood in a deflationary way.

This does implicitly involve a denial. It’s the denial that there are epistemic facts, *as the realist* understands the notion of ‘facts’.⁸ However, we suggest that it’s open to the expressivist to insist that epistemic discourse is not committed one way or the other on the correct understanding of the notion of ‘facts’ that it deploys. Accordingly, epistemic expressivists don’t have to deny that there are epistemic facts any more than they have to deny that epistemic claims are truth-apt.⁹

⁸ Depending on what is meant by “understood in a deflationary way,” Cuneo may feel that he has already dealt with this idea under the heading of “maximalist expressivism”. As we noted above, this is the view that denies that there are epistemic facts as the realist understands them, but allows that there are epistemic facts as the “shadows” of minimally true sentences. We doubt that this is the only way to endorse what we’ve called the Modified Modified Ontic Thesis, but even if it is, we think the arguments Cuneo gives against it are not relevant in the present dialectical context. In the last part of ch. 6 of his book, Cuneo argues that maximalist expressivism is subject to a different sort of objection from the sorts of objections we have been responding to in most of this section of our paper. His objection has to do with whether the maximalist expressivist can successfully draw a line between areas of discourse that are ‘robustly’ or ‘seriously’ representational and those that are representational only in the non-robust sense of being minimally truth-apt and so casting a semantic shadow into reality. This is a distinction expressivists need to draw, and we agree that the inability of a maximalist expressivist to draw it would be a serious problem. However, we believe that this a version of the now familiar problem of drawing a distinction between realist and antirealist treatments of an area of discourse, once we’ve adopted a deflationist or minimalist account of truth (see footnote 10 below). As such, it’s not a problem specifically for expressivism about epistemic discourse but rather one of those general challenges to expressivism about any area of discourse, which we set aside at the beginning of the paper.

⁹ Does this mean that they are committed to addressing question (i) after all? We don’t think so. It’s not as if the deflationist about ‘fact’ is offering a theory of the nature of facts, when he

One might wonder, however: How can the epistemic expressivist *not* deny that there are epistemic facts; expressivism is supposed to be an antirealist view after all?! In shallow sense, the answer to this question is easy. As we see things, the core expressivist maneuver involves changing the question from one about the nature of epistemic facts or values to one about the nature of epistemic evaluations. Once an expressivist has given his answer to the new question by insisting on a disanalogy between epistemic thought and discourse and descriptive thought and discourse, and once he has argued that this answer undermines the first question, he can just stop talking (at least in the capacity of stating his theory). If he does so, he will not have denied that there are epistemic facts. In a deeper sense, however, the answer to this question is a very hard one about distinguishing realist and antirealist positions once we've adopted the deflationary package. Part of the reason some extant expressivists talk about two different perspectives is that it provides a way for them to draw the needed distinction. However, we doubt that this is the only way to draw the needed distinction.¹⁰ And, in any case, any difficulty that attaches to drawing that meta-philosophical distinction is one having to do with nontraditional expressivist positions, in general, and not with specifically epistemic applications of the view. So it falls outside the scope of this paper, which aims to consider special problems that have been claimed to attach to expressivism when it is extended into the epistemic realm and not the general problems that putatively attach to all versions of expressivism.

4. Lynch on epistemic goals, epistemic values and the possibility of inquiry

Lynch (2009) has also argued that whatever the merits of expressivism in metaethics are, its extension to meta-epistemology faces a special problem. His starting point is similar to Cuneo's, but the argument is ultimately more complex in its focus on the commitment to the value of truth. We consider it separately because we think it helps to get deeper at the heart of the issue.

His argument begins with the idea that by forming beliefs (as opposed to other cognitive attitudes such as imaginings, hopings, etc.), we commit ourselves to what he calls the *truth norm*:

(TN) It is *prima facie* correct to believe $\langle p \rangle$ if and only if $\langle p \rangle$ is true. (ibid: 79)

According to Lynch, this follows from facts about what beliefs are.¹¹ Given the truth norm, however, Lynch thinks we very quickly become committed to what he calls the *truth goal*:

proposes to “understand them in a deflationary way”. Rather, he is offering an account of claims that there are facts, and this account recognizes the legitimacy of these claims but seeks to deflate their purport to be about some feature of the world, a feature whose nature needs explication.

¹⁰ This is the issue Dreier (2004) refers to as “creeping minimalism”. He proposes one way out for the expressivist, drawing on O’Leary-Hawthorne and Price (1996), Fine (2001), and Gibbard (2003). There are, however, other ways. See Chrisman (2008) for another proposal.

¹¹ Compare Velleman, who writes, “The concept of belief just is the concept of an attitude for which there is such a thing as correctness or incorrectness, consisting in truth or falsity. For a propositional attitude to be a belief just is, in part, for it to be capable of going right or wrong by

(TG) It is *prima facie* good that, relative to the propositions one might consider, one believe all and only those that are true” (ibid: 78)

The connection is that, according to Lynch, “If I am committed to (TN), and I engage in inquiry, I am committed to (TG)” (ibid: 83). This is what he calls *the trivial connection principle*. The reason he thinks it is true is that he thinks inquiry is a goal-directed activity, where the goal is forming correct beliefs. And he thinks that, by engaging in this activity, we are committing ourselves to the *prima facie* goodness of its goal. So, the proximate conclusion Lynch wants us to draw is that it is *impossible* to engage in inquiry and not be committed to the *prima facie* goodness of having true beliefs.

Thus, what we see from this is that the trivial connection principle is by no means trivial in its implications. With TN, it implies that, just by engaging in inquiry towards the formation of beliefs, we are at the same time committed not only to a claim about the standard for correctness of belief, but also to a claim about some general state of affairs being *prima facie good*—namely, the state of believing true propositions. The ubiquity of inquiry would then entail a corresponding inescapability of a commitment to the value of the epistemic goal of truth. This result is ultimately what Lynch thinks is a special problem for the epistemic expressivist. Here’s Lynch: “...we can’t meaningfully abstract from our own epistemic goals, which in turn means that we can’t reach the epistemically disengaged standpoint. Yet if we can’t reach the epistemically disengaged standpoint, then it is unclear how we can even make sense of epistemic expressivism” (ibid: 90).

His core argument seems to be roughly this: (1) epistemic expressivism is tenable only if we can reach an epistemically disengaged standpoint. Yet, (2) we can reach an epistemically disengaged standpoint only if we can meaningfully abstract from our own epistemic goals, while inquiring. However, in light of the truth norm, the truth goal, and the trivial connection principle, as we’ve already seen, (3) we can’t meaningfully abstract from our own epistemic goals while inquiring. And from these premises, it follows that epistemic expressivism is not tenable.

Naturally, we don’t think Lynch is right. Even if all believers must accept the truth norm and that then commits us, as inquirers, to the *prima facie* goodness of true

being true or false” (2000: 16). Lynch doesn’t endorse the conceptual claim, but he thinks that its upshot about what constitutes belief is correct: “Necessarily, an instance of *K*’ing counts as believing only if: it is *prima facie* correct to *K* that *p* if and only if it is true that *p*” (2009: 82). This is not relevant to our response below, but we believe that Lynch here overlooks important conceptual space between the popular idea that belief aims at the truth and his statement of (TN) in terms of a necessary *and sufficient* condition on the *prima facie* correctness of belief. For it seems that belief might aim at truth merely as part of aiming at something more complex than truth. For example, if we take something like knowledge or understanding to be the more complex general aim of belief, and we take true belief to be a necessary but not sufficient condition on knowledge or understanding, then it’d still be correct to think that belief aims at the truth, but it’d be wrong to think that a belief is *prima facie* correct if and only if true. This is because there’d be room for a belief to be true but not correct since it didn’t amount to knowledge or understanding. So, one can clearly endorse the popular idea that belief aims at truth without being committed to Lynch’s principle (TN). And, if so, one may agree that truth is *an* epistemic standard of correctness for one’s beliefs without thinking that it is the only epistemic standard, which would undermine Lynch’s idea that forming beliefs at all requires commitment to (TN).

beliefs,¹² we think it's a mistake to infer that epistemic expressivism is untenable. In fact, we'll argue that the plausibility of epistemic expressivism is entirely independent of these considerations.

As with our initial response to Cuneo's argument, we think the expressivist should reject Lynch's idea that (1) epistemic expressivism is tenable only if we can reach an epistemically disengaged standpoint. What would support this premise of Lynch's argument? His idea seems to be something like the following, which is remarkably similar to Cuneo's argument stemming from the Modified Ontic Thesis:

- (i) Expressivism is an irrealist position
- (ii) Irrealists about some sort of value claims *E* hold that there is no such thing as *E*-values.
- (iii) In order to hold that there are no such things as *E*-values, one must disengage from any commitment to *E*-values, which is to take up a standpoint disengaged from *E*-values.¹³

Thus,

- (1) Epistemic expressivism is tenable only if we can reach an epistemically disengaged standpoint.

The mistake we see in this reasoning has to do with the notion of 'commitment'. Lynch is right that expressivism is typically seen as an irrealist view about whatever sort of value claims are under discussion, and so the expressivist seeks to avoid *ontological* commitment to the relevant values. Naturally then, in the epistemic case, the epistemic expressivist seeks to avoid ontological commitment to epistemic values.

¹² As it turns out, we think it's possible to resist (TN). We also think it's possible to resist (TG). However, for the sake of focusing on the nub of the issue, we will not challenge them further here.

¹³ Some epistemic expressivists (e.g. Field 2001: 385) suggest that no particular valuing can be properly thought to be objectively correct or incorrect. This suggestion appears different from the disengagement from commitment to *E*-values attributed to expressivists in (iii). If denying objective correctness is all it takes to be an epistemic expressivist, then the above argument won't cut ice, and it would be unfair to attribute it to Lynch. However, we doubt that this is all it takes to be an epistemic expressivist, and Lynch's official view of epistemic expressivism seems to be focused on total disengagement rather than rejection of objectivity. To see why rejection of the objectivity of epistemic values isn't enough for expressivism, notice that an analogous position to ethical relativism or subjectivism for the epistemic domain wouldn't be a form of expressivism. Lynch discusses Field's ideas about objective correctness of epistemic values (2009: 85-86). However, the official characterization of the epistemically disengaged standpoint, to which he thinks expressivism is committed, comes later. He writes: "...if we are to make sense of the epistemically disengaged standpoint, we need to consider the possibility of someone having distinct epistemic ends that don't include true belief" (ibid.: 86) that is, someone who inquires but "who isn't committed to (TG)" (ibid.: 86). Later, he describes the anti-expressivist position as one we have so long as we "can't meaningfully abstract from our epistemic goals" (ibid.: 90). This is why we have put premise (iii) in terms of disengagement from *E*-values rather than in terms of the rejection of the objective correctness of any particular epistemic value.

Importantly, however, we think the notion of being ontologically committed to something is *different* from the notion of being implicitly committed to some value by virtue of engaging in a particular practice. At the very least, there is a cogent way for an expressivist to understand the latter notion such that it is not coextensive with the former notion. This is to redeploy the core expressivist maneuver and construe the idea of being implicitly committed to a value in terms of being committed to *valuing* something, rather than in terms of being ontologically committed to the existence of some value.

For example, in campaigning for a political candidate, one may be thereby committed to the political value of that candidate—that is, one is implicitly committed to thinking that this candidate is better than the other candidates, that this candidate should be elected, etc. (Put another way, by campaigning for a particular candidate, one might well be committed (implicitly) to *valuing* that candidate's success above the success of a rival candidate.) However, that is not yet to think that there exists something – *political value* – which the candidate possesses more of than any of the other candidates like the candidate may possess more shirts than the other candidates. Perhaps it is that, but there is an equally cogent understanding of this implicit commitment to the political value of the candidate as a commitment to adopting certain attitudes and engaging in certain actions involving the candidate. For instance, perhaps one is committed to attitudes like hoping the candidate will win and actions like encouraging others to vote for the candidate.

Likewise, an epistemic expressivist can insist that the disengagement from a commitment to epistemic values mentioned in (iii) is different from taking up the disengaged standpoint mentioned in (1). The former involves disengagement from *ontological commitment* to the values, while the latter involves disengagement from valuing certain things in a certain way. Perhaps the latter is impossible, but that doesn't imply that the former is impossible as well.

To see what we have in mind, compare the ethical case: ethical expressivists *do not* think that we must somehow stop *valuing* things ethically; they are not nihilists. Many ethical expressivists even think that valuing things ethically is a good and inextricable component of the human condition; perhaps (as Kant seems to have thought) we're implicitly always already committed, *in this sense*, to ethical values in the very practice of choosing one way of life over another or one action over another. However, all of that is like being committed to the political value of a candidate; it's consistent with disengagement from or rejection of the *ontological* commitment to ethical values. We just have to understand the notion of being committed to some value *not* as being committed to the existence of a certain kind of thing, but as being committed to taking up certain attitudes and/or acting in certain ways. Likewise, we think the epistemic expressivist could legitimately insist that *even if* Lynch's argument shows that we are always already committed to valuing things epistemically, that doesn't show that we're ontologically committed to the existence of epistemic values. The whole point of the core expressivist maneuver is that, by offering a theory of valuing, we can avoid the problems that attach to ontological commitment to values.

So we think the epistemic expressivist could insist that Lynch's argument from disengagement fails in its conflation of two senses of 'commitment to values'. On the ontological sense of this phrase, he is right that epistemic expressivists will want to

disengage from (or at least avoid ontological commitment to) epistemic values.¹⁴ However, on the non-ontological sense of this phrase, epistemic expressivists may very well be implicitly always already committed to epistemic values, like everyone else who arrives at and supports their views by inquiry. But there is a perfectly cogent expressivist understanding of that commitment in terms of a commitment to valuing rather than to the existence of some kind of thing – epistemic values.

5. Conclusion

Expressivism is a controversial doctrine wherever it comes up, and we have not attempted to defend epistemic expressivism from objections that threaten to undermine expressivism in general. Rather, we have articulated what we take to be the core expressivist maneuver and considered three recent arguments for the claim that the position which results from deploying this maneuver in the epistemic realm is specially problematic.

Some philosophers think that expressivism about an area of thought and discourse involves the denial of the relevant claims' truth-aptness. But as we saw in our discussion of Kvanvig's argument against Field, based on the "non-alethic status" allegedly given to epistemic norms, the epistemic expressivist is not committed to denying the truth-aptness of epistemic claims. For it is open to expressivists to deploy a deflationary concept of truth in order to recognize some epistemic claims as true. That being so, other philosophers think that epistemic expressivism involves the denial adoption of an "external perspective" constituted by the denial that some beliefs are well-supported and others are not, some claims are based on good reasons while others are not, some theories can be supported by the evidence and others cannot. But as our discussion of Cuneo's argument revealed, the epistemic expressivist need not be committed to the possibility of this external perspective. All he needs to be committed to is the possibility of changing the question from one about epistemic facts or values to another one about epistemic evaluations, and to a particular sort of answer to the new question that undermines a presupposition of the old question. We think this just is the core expressivist maneuver as applied to epistemic thought and discourse. Even if that is right, still other philosophers think expressivism about an area of thought and discourse involves disengagement from our "commitment to the relevant sorts of goals and values". However, as we urged in response to Lynch, this need not be the case. The epistemic expressivist does disengage from ontological commitment to epistemic values but this doesn't imply disengagement from a commitment to *valuing* things epistemically.

So, epistemic expressivism is not committed to the "nonalethic status" of epistemic norms, the possibility of a dubious "external" perspective, or "disengagement

¹⁴ Does that mean that we were wrong to claim, as we did earlier against Cuneo, that the epistemic expressivist should not deny that there epistemic facts, and instead remain silent as far as his metaepistemological theory goes? We don't think so. For as long as he has a deflationary story about what's involved in claiming that something epistemological is a fact, this won't carry *ontological* commitment to corresponding epistemic values – that is one of the central purposes in adopting the deflationary package.

from our epistemic goals or values”. It does involve replacing an investigation into the nature of something whose existence is challenged – epistemic facts or values – with an investigation into the nature of something whose existence is not challenged and is quite familiar – epistemic evaluations. Because of this, we think epistemologists should view epistemic expressivism as just as viable of option for developing their meta-theory as it is viewed in ethics.

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